Toorak House – used for more than twenty years as Victoria’s Government House – is possibly the oldest surviving mansion in Victoria. It was built for the Melbourne merchant and soap manufacturer James Jackson between 1849 and 1850 on 148 acres (approximately 60 hectares) of land, shortly before the discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851.

The land was first sold by the Crown to two separate buyers as Lots 16 and 17 at an auction on 10 June 1840, together with all the land between the Yarra River and Toorak Road, stretching east-west from Gardiners Creek to Punt Road. These modern thoroughfares were then little more than government survey lines. The land was intended to be used by ‘gentlemen farmers’, with long, narrow blocks designed to maximise the number of owners with a river frontage.

Lot 16 measured 70 acres, and was sold to Sylvester Brown, a sea captain and merchant, for £18 per acre. Lot 17 comprising 78 acres, fetched £20 per acre, and was purchased by James Campbell, a speculator who also owned land at Campbellfield and Carlton. The lots were resold in the 1840s – Lot 16 due to bankruptcy, and Lot 17 as a deceased estate. The land was bought by James Jackson, who paid £608 for the 148 acres.
This land, developed by Jackson as *Toorak Estate*, extended from the River to Toorak Road, bounded in the west by Orrong Road and in the east by a line drawn midway between present-day St Georges Road and Heyington Place. As described by historian Betty Malone, “Jackson left most of the property as bushland. He chose a site for the house on high ground closer to the highway than to the river, and built a large mansion with surrounding outbuildings and a formal garden. The house stood some distance back from the main roads, with a driveway running south to Gardiner’s Creek Road. He named it *Toorak House*." According to the historian J.B. Cooper, the name Toorak is said to derive from an Aboriginal word meaning “a swamp with rushes”.

As it happened, the Jacksons never lived in the mansion. James died at sea in 1851 on a voyage to England, aged just forty-three years, leaving behind a heavily pregnant wife and several small children. From 1852-3, the house was tenanted by Charles Williamson, a city draper. Soon after, a vice-regal opportunity arose for the mansion.

In 1853, with Governor La Trobe’s term of office about to expire, government officials were searching for an appropriate official residence for his replacement. Until then, La Trobe’s private residence at Jolimont had functioned as Government House. As a temporary solution, *Toorak House* was leased for £10,000 per year – a permanent Government House, it was envisaged, could be built in about two years.

In fact it took 21 years before Government House was built in the Domain in South Yarra. Extensive renovations were carried out to *Toorak House* over the period January 1854 – September 1855, with Governor Hotham arriving in June 1854. More than £34,000 was spent transforming the property – an immense amount for the day, and the cause of much critical comment. Hotham himself – bearing a brief from Whitehall to effect drastic economies – was said to be appalled by the extravagence (John Hetherington, *Witness to things past*).

Sir Charles Hotham, as fate would have it, did not live long enough to savour the new wallpaper. He died on 31 December 1855, only months after the completion of the refurbishment, aged 49.

His tenure at *Toorak House* was followed by that of four other Governors: Sir Henry Barkly (1856-63), Sir Charles Darling (1863-66), Sir John Manners-Sutton (1866-73), and Sir George Bowen (1873-74).
After 1875, the Governor of Victoria resided at the newly-completed Government House in the Domain. After the relocation of the Governor in 1875, the property was purchased outright for £100,000 by the Bendigo mining magnate George Lansell, who subdivided the estate, creating Lansell Road and extending St Georges Road.

*Proposed subdivision of Toorak Estate by George Lansell, 1874. The 39 allotments between Lansell Road and St Georges Road were not realised for quarter of a century.*
Lansell’s subdivision plan of 1874 shows Lots 16 and 17 broken up into 137 allotments, with *Toorak House* and gardens on about five and a quarter acres. However, the 39 allotments between Lansell and St Georges Roads appear to have found a single buyer as a diminished *Toorak Estate*, for they were advertised for sale again a quarter of a century later after the death of Mrs Ann Nicholas, who had been living there since the mid-1880s.

Several long-term owners followed, each one subdividing the estate further. The influential Spowers family (owners of the *Argus* newspaper) lived there for nearly 50 years. During World War II, the property was used by the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force, and was known as *WAAAF House*.

In 1957, *Toorak House* was bought by the Swedish Church. This Swedish Lutheran Church is a meeting point for the Scandanavian community.

Although most of the outbuildings have now been demolished, the exterior of *Toorak House* remains very much as it was when foreign dignitaries paid official visits to the Governor of the fledgling Colony of Victoria.